

Apple Original Films

FATHOM

Production Notes



Directed and photographed by Drew Xanthopoulos (“The Sensitives”), “Fathom” follows Dr. Ellen Garland and Dr. Michelle Fournet, two scientists focused on the study of humpback whale songs and social communication. As they embark on parallel research journeys on opposite sides of the world, they seek to better understand whale culture and communication. The documentary film uniquely reveals a deep commitment and reverence to the scientific process and the universal human need to seek answers about the world around us. From hypothesis to groundbreaking experiences in the field, “Fathom” showcases the passion, curiosity, collaboration, perseverance and work it takes for leading scientists to make scientific discoveries.

RATING: TV-PG

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CREDITS

SCIENTISTS: Dr. Michelle Fournet
Dr. Ellen Garland

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Andrea Meditch
Greg Boustead
Jessica Harrop
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PRODUCER: Megan Gilbride

DIRECTOR: Drew Xanthopoulos

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: Drew Xanthopoulos

COMPOSER: Hanan Townshend

PRODUCTION COMPANIES: Sandbox Films
Impact Partners
Walking Upstream Pictures
Back Allie Entertainment
Hidden Candy

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

The seed for “Fathom” was planted in early 2017, when filmmaker Drew Xanthopoulos heard two different radio stories about dolphin communication. “Something about those stories stuck with me and didn’t let go,” he recalls. “It had never occurred to me that anybody was attempting to decode another form of complex communication like that. I was just so curious about what we know and began reading everything I could get my hands on.”

A seminal work called “The Cultural Lives of Whales and Dolphins” by Dr. Hal Whitehead and Dr. Luke Rendell, led him to delve further into the subject of whales. Books and articles presented exciting new findings about cognition, evolution and culture in species that are some 40 million years old. Xanthopoulos was transfixed. “It was - and is - mostly a mystery to us, but the tiny things that were being uncovered painted a picture that was pure science fiction to me,” he comments. “Brains uniquely large and complex and much older than ours, social groups that are magnitudes larger than most people’s social media networks and a kind of communication made up of complex patterns whose purpose is mostly unknown. I was just beside myself.”

He was keen to channel his interest into a film, but how to do that wasn’t self-evident. “I fell in love with the science, but I’m not a natural history filmmaker,” he remarks. “I make films about people. And it dawned on me that if I found the science story to be so emotional, then surely the people at sea actually doing the work must have transformative experiences. I realized I should start meeting the people behind the science.”

He was able to do that on a large scale in October 2017, when he traveled to Halifax, Nova Scotia to attend the biennial conference of the Society of Marine Mammalogy, the world’s largest gathering for that discipline. He found that whale scientists were happy to talk to him about their work and several invited him to observe first-hand. “They were the most generous people,” he recalls. “I got something like eight invitations to go out on boats around the world.”

One of those offers came from eminent marine biologist and killer whale expert Dr. Robert Pitman, who had a trip scheduled in Australia. Xanthopoulos could stay with Pitman and his team and they’d find a place on the boat for him. The filmmaker was thrilled. “Bob Pitman is an absolute legend who’s possibly seen more whale species in person than any other living human being,” he says. “I figured worst case scenario, it was going to be the greatest vacation of my life. Or I’d actually have the seeds of a film.”

The venture did not begin auspiciously. Xanthopoulos found himself in a fishing boat in the middle of the choppy South Pacific, horrendously seasick. Eventually he made his way to the bottom of the boat, where he passed out, too depleted to film the amazing sights on the ocean. “There were killer whales flying everywhere and I couldn’t care less,” Xanthopoulos remembers. “I was so sick and miserable. I was having this fever dream and I remember thinking, ‘This is pure comedy. My body is literally rejecting this film.’ Then I woke up and I was starving. Like a zombie, I climbed up to the top deck

where all the scientists were and started scarfing down salted rice crackers. The seasickness never came back. I was absolutely cured.”

Having established his sea legs, the filmmaker began fleshing out ideas for the film and seeking out scientists studying whales in the field. “I just wanted to meet anyone who would let me go with them so I could understand their research and the nature of their work,” Xanthopoulos explains. “I started to get a lay of the land and narrow down criteria for the kind of story that I wanted to tell.”

He came to view field biologists as real-life counterparts to the space explorers of science fiction. “To me, field biologists are astronauts that zip off to this other world to study an intelligence that’s extremely elusive,” he says. “They work incredibly hard and go to so much trouble to figure out these new questions about whales, which actually subvert a lot of ways we think about ourselves. Science fiction was a model for the film because no other genre gives us permission to consider another consciousness as ‘equal to’ or ‘other.’ No other genre, I think, captures how subversive the ideas in the film are.”

That creative approach struck a chord with producer Megan Gilbride, whose work spans narrative and documentary storytelling. Gilbride had admired Xanthopoulos’ first feature, “The Sensitives,” and knew him to be a gifted director of photography. “I tend to be drawn to documentary subjects that stand out visually and have distinct points of view,” she remarks. “Drew’s a gorgeous shooter and he had such a great take on how he wanted to approach the story of these scientists and the work they do. It was such a beautiful project with so much opportunity.”

“Fathom” is Xanthopoulos’ second collaboration with executive producer Andrea Meditch, following their work on “The Sensitives.” “Any chance I get to work with Drew and advise him, I’m thrilled to do so,” Meditch affirms. “He is a great talent, able to combine an exceptional skill as a cinematographer with a powerful intellect and deep empathy. With ‘Fathom,’ Drew wanted to highlight new ideas surrounding whale intelligence and communication, which I found extraordinarily exciting. There is a new generation of scientists reframing the questions and he really dug into that. He wasn’t looking to make a traditional natural history film or a film solely about the work of science, which are compelling in and of themselves, but to explore the interface between the science, the kinds of questions being asked and how we understand ourselves and other complex beings.”

THE SCIENTISTS

Among the new generation of scientists was Dr. Michelle Fournet, a marine ecologist who had taken on the virtually unexplored subject of non-song communication among humpbacks in cold water foraging grounds. No catalog of those sounds existed when she began studying humpbacks in southeast Alaska in 2009 when she was 25. During the long process of recording, counting, identifying and cataloguing the different sounds produced by that population, Fournet noticed the prevalence of a particular call, the “whup.” Once she began looking for it, she found it everywhere, including some of the earliest

humpback recordings from the 1970s. She was among the first to recognize the call's importance and made it the focus of her research.

Xanthopoulos was in the very early stages of his research in 2017 when he learned about Fournet's work from a friend, a radio journalist who'd interned at an Alaskan station. "Michelle was still finishing her Ph.D.," says Xanthopoulos. "But she was clearly a fast-rising star in her field because of her exceptional ability to communicate science and also her courage and brilliance to chase questions most had either overlooked or didn't know how to answer."

He cold called the researcher and introduced himself. Fournet describes Xanthopoulos as being sincere and transparent in his desire to learn. "Drew said, 'You know a lot about whales and I don't,'" she recalls. "He wanted to know what he didn't know. We stayed on the phone that first day for almost two hours. It was one of the most interesting, dynamic and really exciting conversations that I've had. And I was very appreciative of his humility and curiosity."

They would meet in person at the marine mammalogy conference in November and get to know each other over the coming year. Xanthopoulos was fascinated by Fournet's potentially paradigm-shifting research into the whup and its function in whale communication. She was designing a study to test her theory that the whup is a contact call, using multiple recordings she had calibrated to emulate how the animals communicate with one another. A speaker would play one of these recordings underwater, with the goal of convincing the whales that they were interacting with one of their own species, tricking them into believing they were hearing the whups of other whales. If whales responded with whups of their own, she would have evidence supporting her hypothesis. Says Xanthopoulos, "What Michelle was attempting was straightforward but pretty brave because there was such a high chance of it totally failing."

In the summer of 2018, Xanthopoulos spent ten days in Frederick Sound, Alaska, where Fournet was doing a pilot run of her study to see if the protocol worked. The trip allowed him to test ideas for filming "Fathom," but more importantly gave him a fuller understanding of what it meant to be in the whales' environment. "I was transfixed not by the sight of whales but the sound of them," he recalls. "You can hear them take a breath from kilometers away, in every direction. It sounds like the world is breathing all around you, at all times. It's incredible."

With hopes of returning to Alaska for Fournet's 2019 field season, Xanthopoulos concentrated on finding a second subject for the film. His search led him to Dr. Ellen Garland, a New Zealand-born scientist who studies humpback whale song, a mating display that is only produced by males. She had begun studying humpback song as a Ph.D. student, her deep curiosity sparked by existing recordings. Years of meticulous research resulted in significant findings about song as culture, with an individual song being learned and passed on from one population to another. For 15 years, Garland had been working with collaborators around the South Pacific to collect recordings of humpback song and explore how far and wide songs were shared, potentially across distances previously thought of as impossible. Analyzing 11 years of field data, she had been mapping the progress of multiple songs from west to east, studying how each changed as it was shared across space and time.

Fournet and Garland represented an ideal combination of similarities and differences. “While Michelle was trying to better understand a single sound all humpbacks make, Ellen was at a turning point of a decade-long project mapping how far and wide humpback songs were being shared throughout the South Pacific Ocean,” Xanthopoulos says. “Her work had been upending the basic assumptions of her predecessors and she was only getting started. To me, Michelle was kind of the microscopic and Ellen was the macroscopic to give context to this larger idea of how another species connects to itself, with communication and culture.”

Importantly, their work is linked by a fundamental interest in humpback behavior and relationships. As Xanthopoulos points out, “It’s not just any sound that Michelle is interested in. Her hypothesis is that the whup is one of the foundational sounds for how humpbacks sustain lifelong relationships. And Ellen is looking at the entire shape of the relationships, eventually on a global scale.”

In 2019, Xanthopoulos went to meet Garland and her husband Matt in Scotland, where she is a Royal Society University Research Fellow at the University of St. Andrews. By that time, Garland knew Xanthopoulos to be genuine in his intent and good company, as well. That comfort level factored into her decision to participate in “Fathom.” “I’m not someone who likes being on camera or likes being the center of attention,” she acknowledges. “I very much shy away from that. So it took someone very special to be able to convince me to let people see into my life; and what it’s like for me in the work that I do, in a professional sense but also in a personal sense. Drew is someone that I really enjoyed just hanging out with to chat about science, to chat about life. He very much puts you at ease.”

Still, the decision to participate in “Fathom” wasn’t made lightly by either scientist. But doing so aligned with their commitment to sharing knowledge with a general audience. As Garland puts it, “It’s important to tell not just the scientific community our results but share all of this knowledge and all of these discoveries with everyone. It’s important to explain what we do, and why, in a way that’s understandable. For me, the film was about talking about the quality of science that we do, how driven we are, how passionate we are about it. I love the science that I do. It makes me happy, asking the questions that I do. That’s what gets me out of bed in the morning - the discovery and the piecing of things together.”

There was also value in presenting a truthful, unromanticized picture of whale science in all its rigor and difficulty. “The work that goes into understanding these creatures is monumental,” comments Fournet. “And in order to do it well, we have to do everything in our power to be as removed from the process as possible. One of my great fears with how humans interact with wildlife is that we’re going to think that whales are like us. And they’re not. It does them an enormous disservice to try and paint them in the light of humanity. And it does them a much greater service to try and paint them in the light of their own existence.”

Xanthopoulos followed his interests and his instincts during the 18 months he spent researching the subject matter and seeking participants for the film. The fact that he came to feature two female scientists is notable, though it wasn’t by design. Until the mid-to-late 20th Century, women were

prohibited from working on research boats, which meant the field was closed off to them. While that has certainly changed, there continue to be numerous systemic issues that stymie women's career advancement and they are still very much in the minority among researchers and high-ranking positions in the field. "As I understand it, marine mammalogy has experienced a sea change in demographics in the last generation," Xanthopoulos remarks. "That said, I know there's an immense drop-off after a certain early point in the career of female researchers that doesn't exist with male researchers. I think every field only benefits from diversity. I don't think it's a coincidence that women have dramatically increased in numbers in marine science while there's also been a boom in questions that hadn't been asked before. And a boom in things explored that hadn't been explored before. Michelle and Ellen are perfect examples of that. To me, the implications of the work that they are doing are profound, in that I think they challenge fundamentally how we see ourselves relative to everything else on the planet."

THE JOURNEYS

"Fathom" follows Fournet and Garland's 2019 field seasons in Southeast Alaska and French Polynesia, respectively. Xanthopoulos was the only person on the shoot, his preferred approach for such an intimate story and also one necessitated by the tight quarters of fieldwork.

The result is an authentic account of the scientific process and a unique immersion into the world of two brilliant, dedicated whale biologists. As Fournet and Garland carry out their research and contend with the unforeseeable realities of nature, "Fathom" captures the rigor, tenacity, patience and fortitude required to study a life-form that inhabits an aquatic environment we barely understand.

The Alaskan location was a small, remote island on Hobart Bay with no electricity, cellular service or plumbing. That made for challenging production logistics, to say the least. Along with 200 pounds of gear, food and water, Xanthopoulos brought 200 pounds of solar batteries and another 200 pounds of solar panels to the island.

Fournet had a limited period of time to collect the data she needed to see if her hypothesis was right or not. She had hand-picked the three colleagues who would assist her in the field: Dr. Leanna Matthews and student research assistant Maggie Knight for the first two weeks; and Ph.D. candidate Natalie Mastick Jensen for the second half. "Because my playback work is so complicated, there's just no way that I could do it alone," Fournet explains. "I could not do the work I do without my colleagues. Building this team together has made all of us better than any one of us alone. So if something wasn't working, I knew that collaboratively we could solve a problem that I could never solve alone."

Problems arose soon enough. Fournet had designed her survey based on her past experiences, when weeks might pass without a whale sighting. But soon after she, Matthews and Knight began the survey in early August, it became clear this year would be unlike any Fournet had ever witnessed. "I expected there to be two whales and instead there were 60," she says. "As long as I've been working with whales in Alaska, I've never seen that many whales in one place at the same time. And as it turns out, you can't use the same survey design with 60 whales as you do with two. It's physically impossible to

answer the question that we set out to answer the way we set out to answer it. If we didn't figure out a way to address the problem and solve it, we would have squandered the good work that had been done and the money that went into supporting the work. So we had to be flexible and adaptable."

The boat for the fieldwork was a 16-foot inflatable Zodiac with an outboard engine. Xanthopoulos had to use a rain slick to protect his camera, which added to the challenge of operating a camera on a lightweight boat. "The rain slick that you put on a camera makes it very hard to operate. It covers your buttons; it's hard to find where the lens is to pull focus," he explains. "And it's hard to look at a viewfinder and not get seasick while the boat's moving and your body's adjusting. I tried not to move because they were trying to listen for whales. The irony is we were working in these very tight quarters, packed with people and gear where you couldn't move your foot without hitting something – in this really wide open space."

While the fieldwork on the water demanded intense concentration and focus, there was plenty of room for camaraderie and fun. There is a communal dynamic that Meditch finds significant. "I think there's something important about the kinds of joyful interactions that they have, because it's indicative of trust and a deep working relationship," she says. "Michelle's ability to lead and mentor and grow a team is probably a different model than has been true for some field seasons in the past. And it is very productive, as we can see on the screen."

That is very much by design, notes Fournet. "When people are happy and when people are well-fed and when people get to sleep, you will have better scientists," she says. "All of the work I do hinges on that property, that our humanity does not get lost. That's a big part of trying to shift the culture of science. Instead of having top-down science where someone is in charge telling everybody what to do and getting upset when it doesn't go right, it's doing science that's collaborative with a team that you trust. And giving people opportunities to grow and to learn, knowing that that benefits everybody."

As Fournet completed her field season, Xanthopoulos traveled directly to French Polynesia, where Garland was continuing her mapping project. "After filming with Michelle for over a month in Alaska, French Polynesia was sort of a shock," he recalls. "The land is so dominant in Alaska but French Polynesia felt like a tiny dry patch in a world of ocean. The deep Pacific waters outside the reef were so choppy and loud that you couldn't hear a whale blow fifty yards away. The way Ellen found whales was also very different. Michelle could sit and listen for blows from miles away to find whales, but Ellen had to either hope the hydrophone would pick up a singer and guess what direction to find them or rely on the captain's network of local fisherman whom he'd call to ask about sightings around the island."

Garland's field season differed from Fournet's in other respects, as well. Her team included longtime colleagues Dr Michael Poole - who she has worked with since 2006 - local boat captain Richmond Frank and a Ph.D. student, Alex South. "Alex was there to help Ellen do her research, but she was also there to teach him how to do this research," says Xanthopoulos. "How to unfurl a hydrophone, how to put it in the water, how to record notes. So you're watching a person who has to mentor someone while at the same time trying to collect data that she really, really needs. So the team dynamics are different."

While Fournet was surprised by an unusually large number of whales, Garland faced the opposite situation. “That year there were lower numbers of whales appearing across the South Pacific, which meant that it was a bit more difficult to find animals,” she notes. “And then of course finding singers, which is what I’m focused on, is an absolute needle in a haystack.”

After 15 years of recording whales in the South Pacific, Garland knows to expect challenges. “I have a motto that anything that can go wrong, will go wrong in the field. So anything that does go right is a bonus, and you just go with it. So when we get these fantastic pieces of data, they’re so hard-fought, it’s exhilarating. You actually get that one good recording, and then you hope you get another one, and another one.”

Remarkably, both Fournet and Garland saw their studies bear fruit and the excitement and wonder is plain to see. It is an astonishing stroke of luck for the film, one the filmmaker didn’t even dream would happen. “I always intended to tell the story of the work,” Xanthopoulos remarks. “I think the process is fascinating on its own. You’d have to be a crazy person to think that there’s going to be a breakthrough while you’re filming a field season. But the fact that it happened when it happened, when I was filming, was completely unexpected and a complete bonus.”

Garland notes that Xanthopoulos was able to document her experience without intruding in the slightest. “Drew was just a fly on the wall,” she says. “We were doing the normal field work and he was standing back, never in the way. He was there to document what we were doing. And he captured what it’s like out on the research boats, which was highly appreciated. It was wonderful. I couldn’t have asked for better. Drew’s a friend.”

Fournet echoes Garland’s sentiments. “I wouldn’t have worked with any other filmmaker,” she says. “The way that Drew approaches telling stories is quite exceptional and he forged a genuine, non-exploitive relationship. I trust him entirely. All of the things that we went through in the doing of the research, by proxy Drew also had to go through in the doing of the research. That’s one of the reasons that I have faith in his ability to tell this story. I know how intimately he understands it because he was there living through it with us.”

The warmth and openness of those relationships is on the screen, too. “Ellen and Michelle were so generous,” says Xanthopoulos. “We were making this film together and I consider them to be collaborators. This film was a life-changing experience for me, in the best way possible. And that is Michelle and Ellen’s gift to me, that experience. Hopefully the film gets as close as it can get to sharing some of that with audiences.”

The particulars of the scientists’ inquiries allow audiences to witness two distinct approaches to field biology. As Meditch describes it, “Ellen and Michelle represent slightly different aspects of field research because they’re asking different questions about different types of communication. What’s wonderful is that their stories are complementary and their work does speak to one another. Seeing them in different field circumstances, in different team settings, in their problem-solving modes; in their rigor and in their joy, they really balance one another. And they are deeply inspiring figures.”

Gilbride adds, “Ellen and Michelle are very serious scientists. We’re just so grateful that they understood what Drew was trying to do with the storytelling and that they were willing to let him participate and get this fly-on-the-wall view of their process. You learn a lot about whales during the course of the movie, but fundamentally it’s about being in the experience with Ellen and Michelle. When they light up, we light up, too.”

Making those experiences accessible on a broad scale informed Fournet’s decision to participate in “Fathom.” “What’s unique about this film is that it shows non-scientists what doing science is actually like,” she says. “I do hope that this film inspires people to understand how science works, so they have more confidence in it. And that it connects people to the amount of effort that it takes to understand the natural world so that we stop taking it for granted.”

COMMUNICATING BIG IDEAS

While “Fathom” is fundamentally a verité-style documentary, it incorporates additional storytelling techniques to convey scientific information and context. Chief among them is the voiceover narration by Fournet and Garland, which is one of the ways we get to know both the science and the scientists. “I knew early on that the movie needed to have woven into it these interstitial chapters that would explain the science that the researchers already understand very deeply,” Xanthopoulos remarks. “The ideas in the film are not only very complicated but they’re actually very new. There haven’t been a lot of people who’ve had time to start really figuring out how to communicate and express the ideas that they’re both uncovering. I knew that in order for an audience to fully emotionally grasp the weight of the conclusion of their work, they had to know the scientific backstory.”

Garland and Fournet’s journal entries, along with individual interviews, provided the basis for the narration. The scientists collaborated with Xanthopoulos and Gilbride to arrive at the final version. For the filmmakers, it was an exercise in precision. “Michelle and Ellen are very rigorous scientists,” notes Gilbride. “With the narration, we were similarly very rigorous in the words that we used and the words that we didn’t use. We want to tell a great story, but a great story is something that genuinely reflects what their research has uncovered and genuinely reflects how they talk about things.”

Xanthopoulos also uses animation to render complex ideas about whale communication, from the nature of song to the way whales interpret sound and distance. For example, a circular image accompanies Garland’s voiceover describing one of the mysteries of whale song. As the filmmaker explains, “Scientists don’t know where a song begins or ends. Or if it has a beginning or an end. But they know it’s cyclical and that whales can sing for days. Ellen and I were talking about that and the idea of a circle, a ring, came to mind. Song is a disk of culture that has enormous importance to the species in ways that we’re just barely starting to understand. We could represent all of that in one image which has so many other parallels, like the retina of an eye. It’s totally alien yet so familiar and beautiful.”

Xanthopoulos trusted his longtime collaborator Hanan Townshend to imbue the film's score with a majesty suited to its themes. Townshend scored the filmmaker's first graduate student project and they've worked together ever since. Says Xanthopoulos, "This movie wanted to have a score with as big of a scope as its ideas. Hanan has worked on films with Terence Malick, so I knew that was in his wheelhouse. He knows how to do big, he knows how to do orchestral. To have a collaborator that knows your work and your style and has grown with you is wonderful. Hanan really found the soul of the film."

Science fiction was lodestar for the score, just as it was for the film's structure and cinematic style. Remembers Xanthopoulos, "I kept saying, we want it to be celestial, to have the depth that science fiction films scores often have. That sense of looking into the abyss and trying to see something, anything. Because that's what Ellen and Michelle are doing."

ABOUT THE SCIENTISTS

Dr. Michelle Fournet

Dr. Michelle Fournet is the director of the Sound Science Research Collective, a small conservation non-profit headquartered in Southeast Alaska. She is also a postdoctoral researcher with the Cornell Center for Conservation Bioacoustics. She completed her doctorate in Wildlife Science from Oregon State University (OSU) through the NOAA/OSU Cooperative Institute for Marine Resource Studies.

Her research interests include using bioacoustics to understand how resilient species are in a rapidly changing ocean, including the potential impact of human noise and climate change on marine species in the Arctic and Subarctic. She is a globally leading expert on humpback whale calling behavior.

Dr. Ellen Garland

Dr. Ellen Garland, in collaboration with the South Pacific Whale Research Consortium, has been involved in recording humpback song across the South Pacific Ocean for the past 15 years.

Originally from New Zealand, Dr. Garland is a Royal Society University Research Fellow in the School of Biology, University of St. Andrews. After completing her Ph.D. in Bioacoustics at the University of Queensland, Australia, she was a National Academy of Sciences' (NRC) postdoctoral fellow at the Marine Mammal Lab (AFSC/NOAA, USA), and a Royal Society Newton International Fellow at the University of St. Andrews. Her broad research interests include animal culture, social learning, bioacoustics, and behavioral ecology. Her primary research focuses on cetaceans, and in particular the cultural transmission, vocal learning, and function of humpback whale song. She is leading the most comprehensive study of large-scale humpback culture in history.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Drew Xanthopoulos

Director, Director of Photography

Drew Xanthopoulos is the director and cinematographer of the feature documentary "The Sensitives" (World Premiere, Competition, Tribeca Film Festival) which was awarded a Special Jury Mention for the Cinematic Vision Award at the Camden International Film Festival.

As a cinematographer, Xanthopoulos most recently DP'ed the narrative features "Discreet" (Berlinale) and "Rogers Park" (Chicago International Film Festival), the doc series "The Mortified Guide" (Sundance), the feature documentary "Daughters of the Sexual Revolution" (SXSW) and has contributed footage to Terrence Malick's "Voyage of Time." He is also on the advisory boards of the Austin Film Society and the Big Sky Film Institute.

As a director/director of photography, "Fathom" is Xanthopoulos' second documentary feature film.

Megan Gilbride

Producer

Megan Gilbride is a two-time Emmy-winning and Independent Spirit Award-nominated producer of narrative and documentary films. She produced the Emmy Award-winning and PBS broadcast documentary "Tower," which was shortlisted for the Best Documentary Academy Award and was nominated for a Peabody Award. She produced "Lovers of Hate," a Sundance Dramatic Competition premiere, released by IFC and nominated for an Independent Spirit Award. Gilbride also produced the PBS broadcast documentary "Sunshine" and co-produced "Where Soldiers Come From" which won an Independent Spirit Award, aired on POV and won a News and Documentary Emmy. A former FIND Fellow, Gilbride most recently produced "Dear Mr. Brody" with Impact Partners and Topic. She is Co-Chair of the Documentary Producers Alliance Membership Committee and a member of the Producers Guild of America.

Andrea Meditch

Executive Producer

Andrea Meditch is an Emmy-winning creative and executive producer, and founder and president of BackAllieEntertainment, LLC.

Her films have won or been nominated for Oscars and top awards at festivals such as Sundance, Tribeca and Toronto. In 2019 she EP'd "Ernie & Joe: Crisis Cops," a film of essential relevance today because it deals with retraining and rethinking policing in the United States.

Previously, she won an Emmy for “Dangerous Acts” and executive produced or produced Oscar winner “Man on Wire,” Oscar-nominated “Encounters at the End of the World,” as well as “Buck,” “Grizzly Man,” “In the Shadow of the Moon,” “The Killer Within,” “Doubletime,” “The Flight That Fought Back,” “The Cage Fighter” and “The Sensitives,” among others.

Meditch regularly conducts workshops and master classes on story development, creative producing, pitch training, the basics of international financing and distribution to emerging filmmakers in the U.S. and internationally. Before starting her own company, Meditch held executive and creative positions at Discovery, including building the first Discovery Films, and at National Geographic. She is a mentor and advisor for the Sundance Producer Labs, American Film Showcase, Points North and the Hot Docs Forum. She holds a Ph.D. in Linguistic Anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin.

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